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"SOLITUDE"
By BIRGER SANDZEN

The Technique of Painting

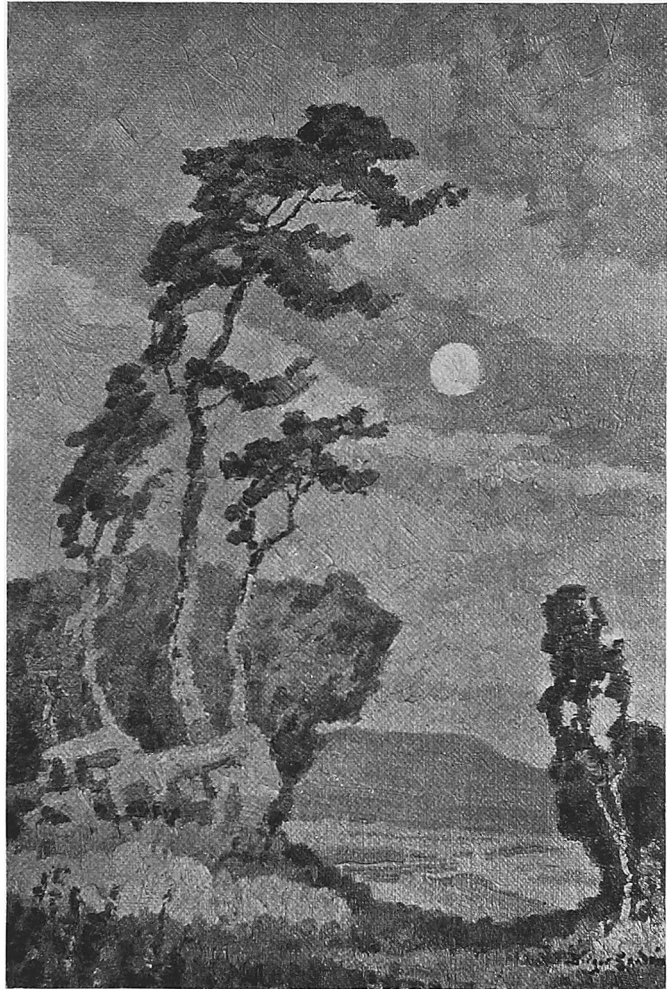
By BIRGER SANDZEN

A WHOLE literature has been produced upon this subject. Hundreds of artists try earnestly to solve the technical problems of their craft and to lead the younger generation on to the right path, and yet, in spite of all this manifest endeavor, it must be admitted that there are comparatively few good technicians. Successful draughtsmen and designs are not so scarce as good painters. The treatment of color is evidently the weak point in Western art. Going through our modern art exhibitions and galleries we are strongly reminded of Berenson's words: "Color in something we Europeans are still singularly uncertain of." It is needless to say that by "Europeans" he means Western artists, or Europeans and Americans.

The reason is, as Goethe expresses it,

"insufficient power to seize the substance," or to comprehend what technique in the real significance of the term means; or, in the case of some artists, lack of energy to acquire it. Art technique means power of self-realization, or individual expression. After getting a solid general foundation of knowledge in our chosen art we have to face the serious task of mastering the craftsmanship that shall help us to give life to our own, individual vision of the beautiful. To acquire this, the highest form of technique, calls for years and years of hard and patient toil even for the most gifted. The sooner the young artist realizes that there are no short cuts in serious art, that he has a long and hard road before him, the better. He may become a popular hero of many exhibitions and one of the "best

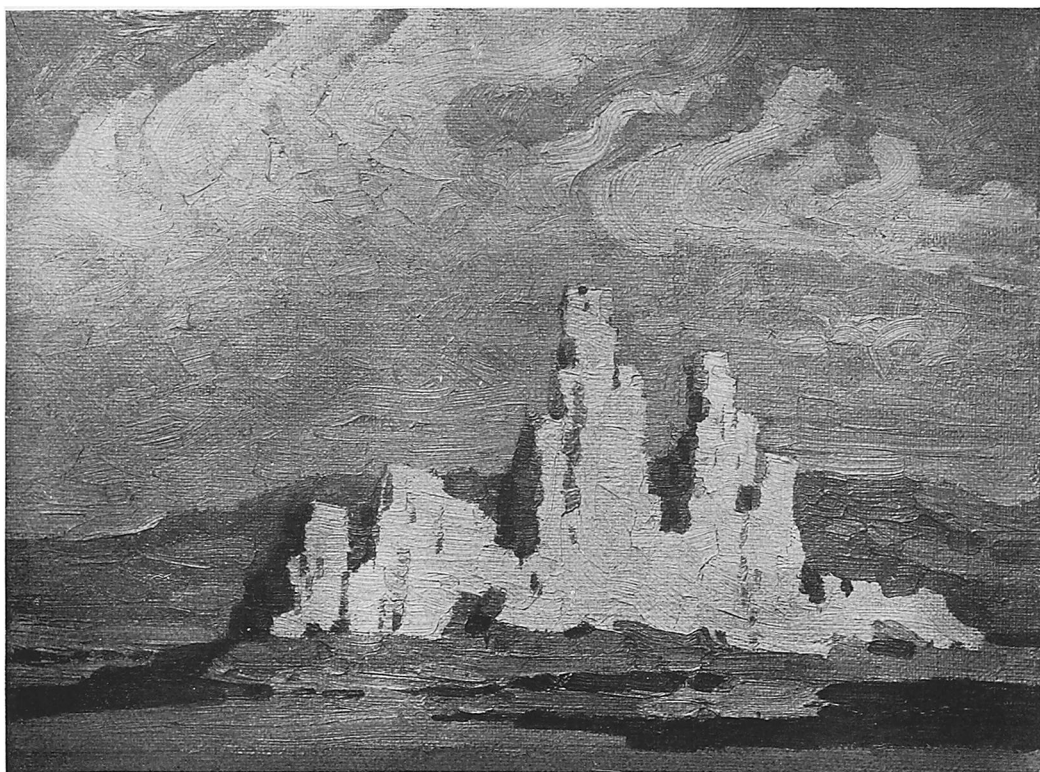
"EARLY MORN"
By BIRGER SANDZEN



sellers" by imitating the style of standard artists, but he will not be taken seriously for any length of time. There are a few expert critics that will not be deceived, and they will put the artist in the class to which he belongs. By and by the general public will yield to expert opinion and agree to a revaluation of a great many art productions, that have been put too high or too low. This revaluation is now commencing to perform its mission in our country, and as a result, many a great reputation is collapsing, and many an obscure artist is being promoted to a place of honor.

The first duty of the artist is to be ab-

solutely honest to himself, his fellow artists and the public. "Thou shalt not steal" is the great commandment that should be deeply engraved on the heart of every one that crosses the threshold of the Temple of Art. "But," you will say, "nine-tenths of all artists have only a very limited amount of talent, and, therefore, it makes very little difference if they are honest or not. They might just as well go ahead and deliberately imitate the color, brushwork and general "style" of some good painter as to try to find in themselves the talent that is not there." On this point I beg to differ most decidedly. Although I admit



"THE WHITE ROCKS"
By BIRGER SANDZEN

that a great many "artists" have little or no talent. I do not believe that Providence is as niggardly in distributing this gift, as we generally imagine. Great geniuses are rare, but good, honest talent, quite sufficient to do enjoyable work, may be found in great plenty everywhere. But, unfortunately, most of this talent is misdirected from the very beginning of its development.

The systematized and standardized methods that modern commercial and industrial mass-production demands in order to obtain immediate results, are also applied in art education and art production in general. Conditions that are fairly normal in the field of industrialism are disastrous in the realm of art.

The art teacher as well as the critic and the general public should respect and encourage a sound and healthy individualism,

which is the only normal and logical motive power in art production, and should discourage imitation, repetition and standardization. A work of art is a personal message from soul to soul and cannot be made after formulas. The Cézanne formula will not lead to goal any more than the old academic recipe.

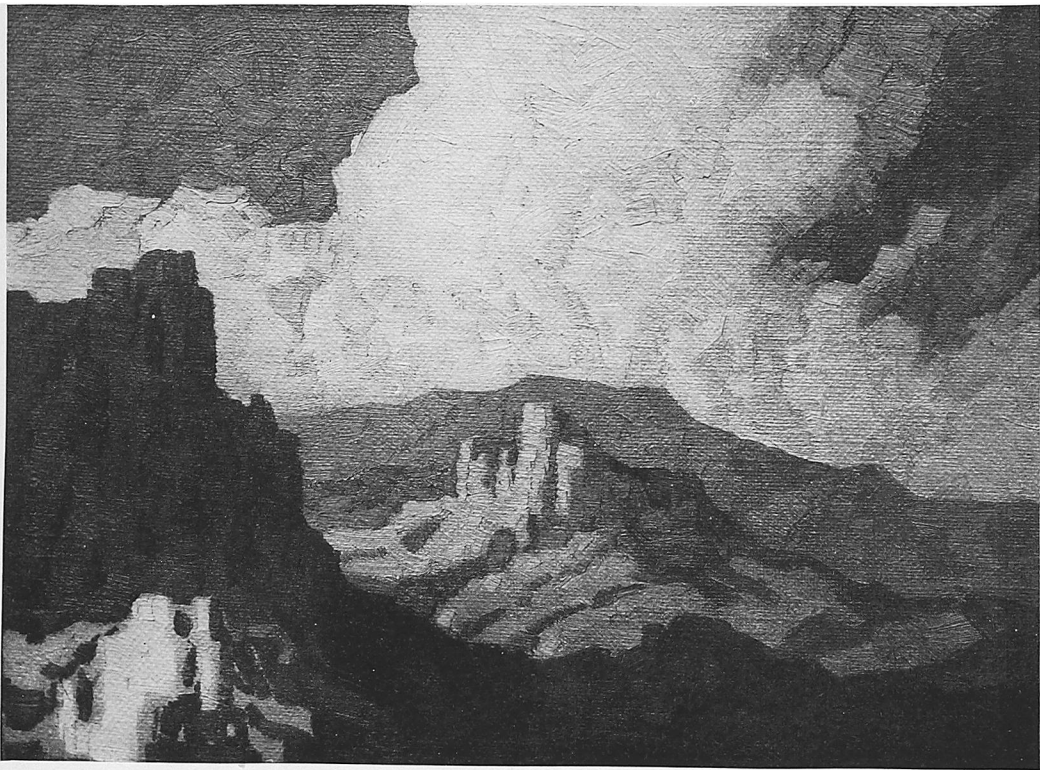
Fortunately, every artist has the opportunity of consulting a teacher that is always ready to give the very best advice to the sincere and unsophisticated disciple. The name of this great master is Nature. Study schools, traditions and masters as much as you like, but do not let them take away from you the most precious gift of the Creator, your own individuality. Individuality and nature in honest partnership will always create new and fascinating works of art, that will never grow old and never weaken.

The world will always love and admire Dürer, Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Hokusai and Millet.

If we study long enough with The Great Teacher we shall gradually work our way through humble imitation to free interpretation. The truth shall make us free, and we shall experience the inexpressible joy of creative self-realization, be it on ever so humble a scale. After laying down the fundamental principle of all art production, we shall, in discussing color, design and rhythm, limit ourselves to a few viewpoints and practical hints. Speaking of color, we should like to consider the difference between the color treatment of the Eastern and Western artist, the various schools, etc., but we shall here treat only one single point: how to handle the oil medium.

Our public and private art collections are full of dead canvases. Some of them never had any color to lose, and we may, there-

fore, leave them out of consideration, but others were only a short time ago full of rich and healthy color, and are now pale ghosts of their former selves. The reason is a very simple one: inadequate color technique. The artist has either used bad pigments or dangerous mixtures of good ones. Wrong mixing or too much mixing will produce a color that is doomed to die. The painter should take the time to study color not only from the artist's but also from the chemist's viewpoint. The latter is none the less important. He ought to get one of the standard works on the subject and follow the advice given in it. If he considers this too much of a task, he should at least send for one of the booklets on the permanency of colors, published by the leading color-men and distributed free of charge. In some catalogs the colors are divided into three groups: permanent, fairly permanent and fugitive. The painter will find all the



"THE CLOUD"
BY BIRGER SANDZEN

pigments he needs, in the first group. After finding out theoretically what is right and wrong, he must begin to experiment thoroughly and patiently in order to learn the practical application of his theories. It is worth while, since it gives a great satisfaction to the painter, who seriously considers the future of his works, to know that he is able to produce a permanent color effect. For the sake of experimenting I sometimes put my paintings in a place where they are exposed to the blazing sunshine of Kansas for several weeks, and they undergo no change, if I have done the work right. Some of the largest public galleries in Europe and America I have visited several times during the last twenty years. In some instances I have had an opportunity to become personally acquainted with the color technique of some of the artists represented in these collections. I knew long ago that some of the paintings would keep and that others would "sink" rapidly. When I come back to look for instance at the glorious simple and honest figure paintings of Carl Wilhelmson in the National Museum of Sweden or in the Gothenburg Museum, I know that they will look youthful and healthy, although some of them were painted many years ago. Wilhelmson is one of those splendid painters who have acquired a thorough knowledge of pigments and their possibilities.

The whole Western world has lived through a long period of color-blindness. The impressionist school was the first sign of recovery. Now not only the average art critic but even the general public are commencing to tolerate clean color, and soon they will demand it. Color will no longer be an unimportant element in painting, but an essential feature. In most of our art schools very unsatisfactory instruction is given in the handling of color. Instead of teaching the pupil from the very beginning how to strike a simple and clean chord of colors, he is put to work on still life studies, such as dirty kettles, frying pans, vege-

tables, etc., shaded by screens or shadow boxes. He is requested to study vague colors in dim light, whereas he ought to begin by painting a few well grouped objects of clear color and attractive form placed in strong light. What would we think of a vocal teacher that would be so chaotic in his method as to coach his pupil on interpretation before he can produce a decent tone or sing in tune?

Every painter who cares about the future of his works, should use the very best canvas and pigments, that can be had for money. He should paint a sufficient number of studies and do all the necessary experimenting before he begins to work on his picture. To start with vague and dirty color and then gradually try to "work up" clean color, is a wretched method. The safest way is to put on only one coat. Do all experimenting on separate canvasses, so that you need not do any guesswork on the picture. Remember that the expert will discover the vague places on your canvas. The painter needs only one kind of oil, pure linseed oil. Nearly all oils and varnishes are harmful to the permanency of color. There are four or five pigments, that no painter can do without. As to the rest, there is plenty of room for individual taste. It is no pleasure to work with a poverty-stricken palette. There are several fine and unflinching pigments. Get acquainted with them and let them serve you, but do not put all of them on your palette at the same time. Vary your palette a little for different subjects. The idea that you have to restrict your palette to five or six colors is altogether abandoned by most of our best modern colorists. We can live and thrive on rye bread and sour milk, but why should a person with a healthy digestive apparatus be un-gastronomic enough to deny himself mushroom and quail if they are on the table? We can get every imaginable color by mixing a few pigments, it is true, but too much mixing kills the color. If there is a good and permanent pigment that will

give us a certain color without mixing, why not use it? Over-mixed pigment is like over-seasoned food. We do not want any seasoning to take away the natural flavor of the mushroom. The color-gourmet wants the individual flavor of his beloved pigment to be left alive on the canvas. Again I say: let us experiment and learn to know the joy of orchestral color.

Then comes the problem of the brushwork. Most people, including artists, are satisfied if the brushwork is easy, broad and fluent or what is generally called "clever." But the real expert demands that it should be expressive, which is something vastly different. The manner in which the pigment is put on the canvas may enhance the charm of the painting or destroy it, and is, therefore, of great importance. The brushwork should be varied both according to the subject and the texture of the canvas. The light and ethereal "touche" in most of Corot's paintings is a source of enjoyment, because it is in perfect harmony with his motives. His soft and tender birches, poplars and willows want exactly that kind of a garb. But how would Rousseau's sturdy oaks appear in such apparel? Why are even the best copies of Rembrandt uninteresting? Simply because the master's inimitable "touche" is wanting. Who could render adequately the simple and yet marvelously expressive brush-strokes of Velasquez's "Innocent X" or Rubens' "Satyrs"? In several of Frans Hals' later works nearly the sole charm consists in the wonderful brushwork. Those who claim that the character of the artist's brushwork is of no importance, have not studied the matter sufficiently or have no eye for the sensuous

charm peculiar to the oil medium.

Then there remains for the painter the question of design and rhythm. Even here nature is a trustworthy teacher. By studying humbly and diligently nature's form, we shall gradually learn to distinguish between essential and inessential things and develop our inborn sense of proportion and balance. When this reaches its maturity we are able to grasp rhythmic line. This evasive quality is like the fragrance of the flower. We cannot define it, but it is a real thing, and it gives us great joy whenever we meet it in its noblest form. Who can stand before Millet's "Sower" and not be profoundly moved by the rhythmic movement of this majestic figure? Or who can resist the rhythm of the bewitching foreground figure in Velasquez's "Las Hilanderas"? Among landscape painters that have mastered the rhythmic line I shall only mention honest, old père Corot and the Swedish painter Karl Nordström, two men of altogether different temperament, but who traveled the same road in quest of simple and sincere means of expression. Many of my readers have been under the spell of the rhythm in Corot's familiar "Landscape" or "The Dance of the Nymphs." Some of you may have seen and enjoyed Nordström's "Storm Clouds" and the tremendously strong lines of his "Western Sea."

There is no recipe for rhythmic line, but the Great Master can teach it to him who sees with the eyes of a child and whose vision has not been dimmed by formulas. Let us remember Julius Lange's words: "Art must ever be re-discovered and made over again from the beginning."

